

**SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE****Full Committee Meeting**

Minutes of the Meeting

April 14, 2025

**Members Present (in-person or remote):** April Allen, Representative Terry Alexander, Russell Baxley, Representative Neal Collins, Dr. Bob Couch, Representative Bill Hager, Barbara Hairfield, Melissa Pender, Dr. Patty Tate, Senator Ross Turner

**EOC Staff Present:** Tenell Felder, Hope Johnson-Jones, Dr. Rainey Knight, Dr. Matthew Lavery, Dr. Jenny May, Dana Yow

EOC Chair April Allen opened the meeting and asked for a motion to approve minutes from the February 10, 2025 full committee meeting. After the meeting minutes were approved, Allen noted there would be a change in the order of the agenda to accommodate a presenter and requested that EOC Academic Standards and Assessment (ASA) chair Patty Tate provide a report of the ASA subcommittee March 17, 2025 meeting.

Dr. Tate informed committee members that the subcommittee meeting had the following three information items: a special presentation by the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) on the Stackable Credentials System and its impact on College and Career Readiness, an update by EOC Communications Manager Tenell Felder on the EOC's Chronic Absenteeism Initiative, and a presentation by EOC Deputy Director Dr. Matthew Lavery on credit recovery analysis.

Concerning the Stackable Credential System, Dr. Tate informed committee members that the updated tiered credential system, if passed, would apply to 2024-2025 10<sup>th</sup> graders. Next, Dr. Tate shared that EOC staff is currently putting together a pilot public awareness campaign on chronic absenteeism that would kick off in late summer. Finally, Dr. Tate shared that the credit recovery analysis report provided by Dr. Lavery looked at the full credit recovery history of an entire ninth grade graduate cohort and showed subcommittee members its impact on post-secondary success.

At the conclusion of her report, Allen asked if there were any questions. EOC member Dr. Bob Couch asked when it would be determined what the three points would be for the stackable credential system. EOC Executive Director Dana Yow responded that those tiers would be coming to the ASA subcommittee meeting in May, and that the full committee would be informed of that information once the subcommittee voted in May.

Hairfield then commented that students in Charleston school district are receiving career readiness honor cords for graduation. She expressed hope that the tiered credential system might also motivate students to get certifications.

Following no more comments or questions, Allen called forward EOC Director of Qualitative Research and Stakeholder Engagement Dr. Jenny May to report on the State Funded Full Day 4K report for FY 2023-24 & 2024-25. Dr. May thanked the committee for the opportunity to present and EOC staff for assisting with the report. Next, Dr. May reviewed Proviso 1.47 which authorized the EOC to conduct an annual evaluation of the South Carolina Child Development Education Pilot Program and to issue findings in a report to the General Assembly by March first of each year. After reviewing common terms seen in the report, Dr. May highlighted the changes and proposed revisions to CERDEP legislation which includes access to waitlists in September rather than in November, and the South Carolina Department of Education providing a Sun ID number to all children who receive services from a public or private 4K provider. Dr. May then established that the report would answer the questions related to access to CERDEP, quality of CERDEP programming, and the impact of CERDEP participation on kindergarten readiness.

Next, Dr. May reviewed CERDEP participation numbers, noting that 18,069 four-year-olds were served by CERDEP in the 2023-24 school year, and were enrolled in public kindergarten in the 2024-25 school year. During the 2023-24 school year, there were approximately 18,342 students potentially eligible for CERDEP who were not enrolled in CERDEP or Head Start.

Dr. May then spoke about CERDEP access, noting that the report found that CERDEP 4K was available in all school districts except Beaufort, Greenville, Horry, York 2 and SC Public Charter School Districts. It was also reported that First Steps 4K was available in all counties except Abbeville, Allendale, Calhoun, Clarendon, Edgefield, Fairfield and McCormick counties. She noted that First Steps allows children to attend First Step 4K classrooms across counties.

At this point, Representative Terry Alexander asked why some counties did not offer 4K programs. Dr. May responded that sometimes there were not enough childcare centers for First Steps to recruit to participate, referring to them as childcare deserts. Dr. May also explained that there are extra demands on centers to meet the requirements that First Steps has for its centers, that centers might not be willing or able to meet.

She then noted an error in the printed documents committee members received – noting that Chester County does have First Steps centers while Calhoun does not.

Next, Dr. May began to discuss the number of children on a waitlist for CERDEP services. During the 2023-24 school year, 402 children were on the waitlist – which was an increase from 203 the previous year. Dr. May noted the increase might be due to an improvement in data collection and of being aware of more students who were placed on a waitlist. She then noted that the EOC would release a report in upcoming months that looked specifically at the CERDEP waitlist process.

Dr. May also reported that financially, South Carolina invested more than \$114 million in the 2023-24 fiscal year into CERDEP noting that it is the largest investment to date. She also noted this amount suggests the state is serving more children and families than in years past. The report states that South Carolina is 37<sup>th</sup> in financial investment in early childhood.

In relation to quality, Dr. May noted that South Carolina meets seven out of the ten NIEER benchmarks of quality. The three policies not met are screening and referral, assistant teacher degree, and teacher degree.

In relation to impact on readiness, the report showed that 35% of students who participated in CERDEP achieved demonstrating readiness on the KRA while only 25% of students who did not participate in CERDEP demonstrated readiness. Dr. May stated this suggests that CERDEP programming is helpful and worthy of time and attention.

The following recommendations were made in the report:

- Increase enrollment efficiency for eligible students
- Increase CERDEP infrastructure using data to prioritize piloting efforts
- Continue to increase quality by meeting NIEER benchmarks (screening and teacher qualifications)
- Recruit families for available seats using additional marketing strategies
- Work with SCDE to access additional details in attendance data
- Publish additional papers about CERDEP that provide more details on specific topics

Dr. May concluded her presentation by reiterating the need for universal hearing, vision and developmental screeners in 4K programs. She then asked if there were any questions.

Dr. Couch asked if the report took into account child development centers to which Dr. May responded that they do if they are a CERDEP program. She also suggested that Dr. Couch could speak with First Step representatives for more information of how child development centers could get connected with First Steps.

Representative Neal Collins then asked if there were childcare centers that had the capability of having more students.

Dr. May replied they do, but noted there are discrepancies in making sure that the student is eligible for services and finding a location that has a CERDEP program.

Collins asked if CERDEP had open enrollment and asked about cross-county enrollment for childcare deserts.

Dr. May replied that the data from the report indicates there are more opportunities than deserts making it unlikely the need for cross county enrollment.

Collins then asked if the recommendation was for better marketing to which Dr. May replied the recommendation was twofold – there needed to be better methods for connecting families with open seats and that they needed to recruit the seats that are open that need children to fill them.

Allen then asked if the proposed dashboard would have information on open seats and their locations. Dr. May clarified that the dashboard's purpose is to show academic outcomes but that there were a variety of websites started under the original preschool development grant whose purpose was to do just that. These websites include Palmetto Pre-K which shows 4K service opportunities for CERDEP, Head Start and First Steps, while also providing sign-up opportunities. Other such websites are First Five – which shows services for children from birth to age five, and the Child Care Resource and Referral website managed by the SC Department of Social Services.

Dr. May stated it would also be beneficial to have a designated person families could connect with to assist them through finding and understanding 4K programs for their child. This representative would be referred to as a 4K navigator.

Yow then stated that EOC staff was currently looking into the waitlist process for 4K programming – stating that the waitlist needed to be a dynamic process and allow for all state funded 4K programs to work in tandem to place children. She also stated the importance of pupils-in-poverty having access to 4K services.

Representative Alexander then asked Dr. May to clarify if there were approximately 5 counties where CERDEP was not being offered. Dr. May replied that was correct but specified that did not mean those counties were not offering *any* 4K services, but that they were not offering *state funded* 4K services. She also clarified that in order to participate in state funded 4K, a poverty threshold needed to be reached.

Representative Alexander asked if districts decided if they wanted to participate to which Dr. May replied yes.

Barbara Hairfield then asked Dr. May if these 4K programs such as Head Start and First Steps were attempting to recruit the same demographic of children. Dr. May confirmed this though distinguished that Head Start was a federal program and had a different poverty threshold from First Steps which was state funded.

Representative Alexander and Allen reiterated the need for 4K providers to best place and provide services for students and enrollment efficiency.

Dr. May agreed and restated that EOC staff was looking into that specific issue. Yow also clarified that they were working on getting the data to help answer those questions.

Following this, University of South Carolina Assistant Professor of Economics Dr. Jessica Brown was called forward to discuss the CERDEP 2024 cost report.

She stated the purpose of the report was to estimate the full cost of providing 4K programs and to evaluate the adequacy of the current reimbursement rates. She stated that Darla Moore School of Business researchers identified what drives the cost of 4K programs and what leads to variation in cost between providers. Dr. Brown then reviewed the methods used to assess per-pupil cost vs. reimbursement rates.

Next, Dr. Brown reviewed the four modeled provider types that were examined based on setting, teacher qualifications, teacher pay level, and numbers of students.

Dr. Brown then explained to committee members the factors that contributed to program costs – the largest being staffing which accounted for 40-60% of costs. Other cost drivers included teacher qualifications and compensation, class program and size and facility ownership.

Other findings from the report indicated that the less expensive costs of private 4K providers was due to lower teacher salaries. In relation to this finding, Dr. Brown stated that higher education requirements for public providers lead to higher wages/costs.

The following policy considerations were given in the report:

- Address teacher pay disparities
- Account for high vacancy rates
- Consider variable reimbursement rates and rate alignment with other public programs
- Align rates with inflation

The following recommendations were given in the report:

- Tie rates to teacher salaries/qualifications
- Assess causes of vacancies
- Differentiate by provider type and geography
- Continue supporting private providers with resources and training
- Update cost estimates annually
- Convene stakeholders to define fair reimbursement

Following this, Dr. Brown asked if there were any questions.

Representative Hagar thanked Dr. Brown for her presentation, then asked who pays the difference between the cost and reimbursement and stated he believed it would be taxpayers.

Dr. Brown replied that she believes the school districts would be covering that difference.

Yow then stated that there were different reimbursement rates for public and private centers. She also pointed out the nuance that reimbursement rates could differ due to a teacher's degree.

Representative Alexander then asked Dr. Brown if South Carolina had the lowest cost in the country for 4K providers to which Dr. Brown clarified that she was speaking of the lowest pay for childcare workers.

At the conclusion of questions for Dr. Brown's presentation, Allen called forward EOC Director of Strategic Innovation Dr. Rainey Knight to discuss the social studies standards cyclical review process. Dr. Knight provided committee members with background, a timeline of the process as well as letting them know they would receive a report in December 2025. She stated the report would include state and national recommendations. Dr. Knight reminded committee members that the EOC does not write the standards – just review and make recommendations to the State Department who would write the standards. The standards would then be up for public review and would return to the EOC to approve. Allen asked why the standards would not take effect until 2027 to which Yow replied that it takes a while for the standard process. Dr. Knight also replied that it was a monumental task and that it could take until 2027 to be in the classroom. Representative Hager then asked if the review committee had been finalized to which Yow replied the national review team had been finalized and that nomination letters for the state team had been sent out. Dr. Knight stated they were also still accepting nominations for the state team and could share those with Mrs. Yow or herself.

Next, Dr. May was called forward again to give an update in the Beating the Odds Investigative study – a multi-year study to examine why some schools with high poverty rates are able to beat the odds and have high achievement rates, excellent ratings on their school report cards with no unsatisfactory designation. The schools visited this year are as follows: West Pelzer Elementary School (Anderson One), Honea Path Elementary (Anderson Two), Flat Rock Elementary (Anderson Three), Kershaw Elementary (Lancaster), and Hopkins Elementary (Richland One). She stated that EOC staff was in the process of analyzing data from the most recent visit and would determine if updates were needed to the conclusions reached during the investigative stage of the study.

Dr. Tate asked if there were more schools that were added to the BTOIS schools to which Dr. May clarified that they visited new schools for the purpose of confirming the findings of the investigative stage.

With no further questions, Dana Yow was asked to give the executive director update. She informed members about the advisory group for the cyclical review of the accountability system stating that parents, high education, district, workforce and business representatives would be involved. She also showed committee members the timeline of the process and explained the focused convenings that would take place. She informed members that the dates for retreat would be August 10-11<sup>th</sup>.

Next, Dr. Couch presented an action item of creating the nomination committee for EOC Chair and Vice Chair. The nomination committee consists of Dr. Couch, Representative Hagar, Dr. Tate, and Senator Turner. Dr. Couch requested to meet with the committee following adjournment and stated that the committee would come forward with its recommendations during June's full committee meeting.

After a vote passing the formation of the nomination committee, the meeting was adjourned.